

High Quality Performance Measures Alignment of Outputs and Outcomes

Special Note

This skill building activity focuses on the logical connections or alignment of performance measures. It can be used to apply the concepts and principles covered in this module to real world situations.

Introduction

This exercise allows learners to review sample output and outcome sets and determine if the sets are logically connected. For those output-outcome sets that are not aligned, the learner identifies the problem.

Key Points and Definitions

Review alignment. In the performance measurement world, alignment is the proper or desirable coordination or relation of components. Look for logical progression and inter-relationship.

Look for a logical flow between the need, intervention and outcome (theory of change).

- Start with the community need or problem. Be clear about the extent and severity of the problem. Why are you are implementing the program?
- Connect the outcome to the need/problem. What change do you want to see? The important outcome or change should address the identified need or problem.
- Keep the outcome closely aligned to the intervention. The intervention is designed to address the need or problem. Ensure that the outcome makes sense given the intervention. A particular intervention may generate a number of short and long term outcomes. When selecting the outcome for performance measurement, consider the intervention dosage¹ and determine the outcome most directly resulting from the intervention. A conflict resolution project for 5th graders would be ill advised to claim an outcome like “improved academic performance”. However, “decrease in physical aggression at recess,” might be appropriate if the problem has been identified as playground aggression and the intervention is teaching ways to resolve conflicts peacefully during playtime.

Look for alignment between the output and outcome.

- The output should flow logically from the intervention, and the outcome should flow logically from the output.
- The output and outcome should measure the same intervention and group of beneficiaries.

¹ Dosage refers to the frequency (how often does the service happen), intensity (how much service happens) and duration (how long and over what period does the service happen). See the Theory of Change module for more information.

Skill Building Activity #2 – Alignment of Outputs and Outcomes

Sticking Points and Common Issues

Below are some issues that may come up as learners consider the material, along with notes on how to respond to these issues.

How do we know that our intervention is causing the outcome? We are tutoring in reading but there is another tutoring program in the school and some of our kids go to that one too, so how do we know our intervention is the cause of the outcome?

Programs often wonder about attribution: Are you claiming too little or too much given your intervention? How do you know what your contribution is? First, your theory of change helps you put forth a logical cause-and-effect rationale. This would be the realistic outcome expectations given the documented need and your evidence-based intervention. The same evidence you used to support your intervention probably provides information on the kinds of outcomes you could expect. Make sure your outcome is closely tied to or aligned with your program intervention. What will be the direct result? For instance, if you work on oral reading comprehension and phonetics with 2nd graders, then those are the skills that you will measure, as opposed to trying to assess another area such as creative writing, which is not part of your intervention. Likewise, trying to claim gains in all areas of language arts would not be aligned with the intervention.

I want to use the national performance measures but I'm not sure my intervention is exactly aligned with the required outcome. How important is that?

It is very important that the intervention (what you are doing) and the outcome (what you hope changes) are closely aligned. Disappointment is sure to follow if you try to measure an outcome that cannot occur given the intervention. Your desire to use the national performance measures is to be applauded but look closely at the accompanying instructions first. If alignment is an issue, talk with your program specialist/program officer. Depending on your Program (AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, VISTA), you may have the ability to generate your own performance measure with the outcome you believe is most significant AND most aligned with your intervention. Likewise, if your reflection leads you to believe that a required outcome makes sense for your program; you may consider what could be changed in the intervention to successfully accomplish that outcome.

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Exercise

Instructions: Read each of the examples and indicate whether the output and outcome are aligned. Are they likely to occur given the intervention? Is the outcome likely to result from the output? Are they measuring the same intervention and beneficiaries? If you chose “not aligned”, explain why. If you are not sure, explain what additional information you would need.

1. INTERVENTION: National Service participants regularly monitor river wildlife in a local county park. They identify and eradicate invasive species and plant native species which support aquatic animals.

Output: County park river habit is improved (EN4²).

Outcome: County park is cleaner and better maintained.

☐ Aligned ☐ Not aligned ☐ Not sure; not enough information

If you checked “not aligned” or “not sure”, explain: _____

2. INTERVENTION: National Service participants teach and coach youth in a 6-week afterschool sports program which includes understanding the fundamentals of and participating in softball, basketball and volleyball through skill drills and team play.

Output: Youth participate in sports program activities (H4).

Outcome: Youth increase aerobic fitness.

☐ Aligned ☐ Not aligned ☐ Not sure; not enough information

If you checked “not aligned” or “not sure”, explain: _____

3. INTERVENTION: National participants facilitate emergency readiness classes targeting isolated seniors. Each senior receives an emergency kit.

Output: Seniors participate in emergency readiness classes (D1).

Outcome: Seniors are safer in the event of an emergency.

☐ Aligned ☐ Not aligned ☐ Not sure; not enough information

If you checked “not aligned” or “not sure”, explain: _____

² These numbers refer to performance measures listed at <https://www.nationalserviceresources.org/npm/home>.

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4. INTERVENTION: National Service participants serve in a pre-school education program that serves children ages 3-5 five days per week. Participants work in small groups reading books to children, pointing out different parts of a book, asking children to describe the characters and plots by looking at the pictures, sounding out new words and using words in different contexts, and modeling polite behavior and social skills.

Output: Children complete participation in the early childhood education program (ED21).

Outcome: Children demonstrate gains in school readiness in terms of literacy skills (ED24).

☐ Aligned ☐ Not aligned ☐ Not sure; not enough information

If you checked "not aligned" or "not sure", explain: _____

5. INTERVENTION: National Service participants serve youth ages 12-15 in an afterschool program providing one-on-one tutoring in all subjects and help with homework. Students can walk in and receive assistance or study on their own four afternoons per week.

Output: Students complete participation in the education program (ED2).

Outcome: Students improve school attendance over the course of their involvement in the education program (ED6).

☐ Aligned ☐ Not aligned ☐ Not sure; not enough information

If you checked "not aligned" or "not sure", explain: _____

6. INTERVENTION: National service participants design a website to publicize a health clinic's services at multiple locations and develop online intake and appointment-maker features for clients. They also help individual sites utilize social media to increase the number of people requesting health services (e.g. HIV testing, vaccinations).

Output: The organization receives capacity building services (G3-3.4).

Outcome: New technology system put in place (G3-3.11)

☐ Aligned ☐ Not aligned ☐ Not sure; not enough information

If you checked "not aligned" or "not sure", explain: _____

Skill Building Activity #2 – Alignment of Outputs and Outcomes

Answer Key and Points to Consider

1. **INTERVENTION:** National Service participants regularly monitor river wildlife in a local county park. They identify and eradicate invasive species and plant native species which support aquatic animals.

Output: County park habitat is improved (EN4).

Outcome: County park is cleaner and better maintained.

☐ Aligned ☒ Not aligned ☐ Not sure; not enough information

If you checked “not aligned” or “not sure”, explain: The outcome does not align with and logically flow from the output and the intervention. Monitoring river wildlife populations and planting native species activities do not connect to park cleanliness.

FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION

Aligning the outcome with the output. Come up with outcomes that are aligned with the intervention and the output. What is the intervention trying to change as a result of the improved habitat? Possible outcome responses:

- Native plantings survive and the plant species populations increase.
- Fresh water amphibian population numbers increase.

What might the project consider when deciding which outcome to select?

- Check the theory of change. What is the identified need the project is trying to address? Is there evidence that the intervention will support the identified outcome?
- Check the timing. Is the selected outcome one that can be measured given the timing and project resources?

2. **INTERVENTION:** National Service participants teach and coach youth in a 6-week after-school sports program which includes understanding the fundamentals of and participating in softball, basketball and volleyball through skill drills and team play.

Output: Youth participate in sports program activities (H4).

Outcome: Youth increase aerobic fitness.

☐ Aligned ☐ Not aligned ☒ Not sure; not enough information

If you checked “not aligned” or “not sure”, explain: It is possibly aligned but you would need more information. The output is connected to the intervention but it is not clear if participation in the sports program activities as described increases aerobic fitness.

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FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION

More information about the intervention. What do you need to know to be able to align the output and outcome? Generate questions that would help determine whether the aerobic fitness outcome is an accurate outcome or not.

- Is the sports program specifically focusing on building aerobic fitness?
- How much time are youth physically active? Do they consistently get their heart rates up (e.g. vigorous exercise for 15 minutes or more)?
- Is the focus of the intervention on physical activity or is it on knowledge of the games and skill development through lecture and short practice (e.g. youth listen to lecture and then take turns shooting baskets)?
- Is the program measuring pre-post aerobic fitness of the youth?

Other outcomes. If the program **does not** focus on youth increasing their physical activity and aerobic fitness, what might be an outcome aligned with the output and intervention? (Note: It may no longer come under Healthy Futures.) Possible outcome responses:

- Youth improve sports skills.
- Youth improve team work skills.

3. INTERVENTION: National participants facilitate emergency readiness classes targeting isolated seniors. Each senior receives an emergency kit.

Output: Seniors participate in emergency readiness classes (D1).

Outcome: Seniors are safer in the event of an emergency.

☐ Aligned ☒ Not aligned ☐ Not sure; not enough information

If you checked “not aligned” or “not sure”, explain: As written, the outcome would not logically flow from the output. Seniors will not automatically be safer during an emergency just because they have participated in a class. There are too many other factors which cannot be anticipated (what kind of emergency, where the seniors are, etc.)

FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION

Finding the outcome. Consider what an ambitious but realistic outcome might look like. What additional information about the intervention would be needed to help determine an appropriate outcome?

- How long is the emergency readiness class?
- Is the class “lecture only” or do seniors spend time examining the emergency kits and learning how to use the items?

In this case, a possible outcome might be: Seniors demonstrate how to use all emergency kit items.

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- Do seniors practice and master emergency safety strategies (e.g. able to turn off gas, able to use a fire extinguisher)

In this case, a possible outcome might be: Seniors feel better prepared to handle an emergency situation in their home.

4. **INTERVENTION:** National Service participants serve in a pre-school education program that serves children ages 3-5, five days per week. Participants work in small groups reading books to children, pointing out different parts of a book, asking children to describe the characters and plots by looking at the pictures, sounding out new words and using words in different contexts, and modeling polite behavior and social skills.

Output: Children complete participation in the early childhood education program (ED21).

Outcome: Children demonstrate gains in school readiness in terms of literacy skills (ED24).

☒ Aligned

☐ Not aligned

☐ Not sure; not enough information

FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION

Other performance measure options. Given the intervention description, are there other "School Readiness" (Pre-K) performance measures that might also be appropriate for this activity?

- The intervention includes, "polite behavior and social skills" as a part of the activity description, so another possible outcome might be: Children demonstrate gains in school readiness in terms of social and/or emotional development (ED23). However, the intervention, as described, focuses primarily on literacy skills.

More information about the intervention. What else would you want to know about the intervention to determine when ED23 might be a more meaningful outcome?

- To what extent do the participants work with children in social/emotional development?
- What kinds of things do they do and what is the "dosage" of service?

5. **INTERVENTION:** National Service participants serve youth ages 12-15 in an afterschool program providing one-on-one tutoring in all subjects and help with homework. The program is "drop in" and takes place four afternoons per week.

Output: Students complete participation in the education program (ED2).

Outcome: Students improve school attendance over the course of their involvement in the education program (ED6).

☐ Aligned

☐ Not aligned

☒ Not sure; not enough information

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If you checked “not aligned” or “not sure”, explain: It is not clear how the outcome, improved school attendance, would occur based on the drop-in afterschool program activities. More information is needed.

FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION

More information. What you want to know to determine whether the output and outcome are aligned?

- Check the Theory of Change. What student need or problem is the intervention trying to address? Are students targeted because of poor attendance (ED6), homework completion issues or disengagement from school (ED27)?
- Check the target population. The reasons students are referred to a program can provide clues to the outcomes.

If homework completion is the identified need, improved academic engagement (ED27) may be the more appropriate outcome for this activity. (Note: “Improved academic engagement” involves “increased completion of assignments including homework” and/or “increased attachment to school and increased educational aspirations”, among other attitude and behavior changes.)

6. **INTERVENTION:** National service participants design a website to publicize a health clinic’s services at multiple locations and develop online intake and appointment-maker features for clients. They also help individual sites utilize social media to increase the number of people requesting health services (e.g. HIV testing, vaccinations).

Output: The organization receives capacity building services (G3-3.4).

Outcome: New technology system put in place (G3-3.11)

☒ Aligned ☐ Not aligned ☐ Not sure; not enough information

If you checked “not aligned” or “not sure”, explain: The output and outcome are aligned. The capacity building services (output) including the creation of the website, social media, online intakes and appointment-maker are new systems put in place (outcome) for the organization. However, there may be a better or more meaningful outcome.

FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION

Other measure option. Check other Capacity Building performance measures that might be appropriate for this activity. What need is the intervention trying to address?

- The service delivery addresses access to services by the targeted community. An outcome focused on the scale of the project service, that is, increasing the number of people receiving service delivery, seems more meaningful.

In this case, a possible outcome might be: Organization experiences an increase in requests for their programs and services as a result of capacity building services (G3-3.14).